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ABSTRACT

Asserting that widespread Head Start and state universal prekindergarten programs validate the need for a nationalized preschool program, this paper presents an argument for nationalizing Montessori-style preschool education in the United States. The paper maintains that Montessori-style classrooms use developmentally appropriate practices as outlined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and that by realigning resources already in place, a national preschool program could exist. Head Start programs for at-risk children and state prekindergarten programs for all children are described as highlighting play as a tool for developing social skills. The Montessori approach to preschool is presented as a model wherein play meets work and learning, and the prepared environment is described as comprised of practical life and occupational materials, sensorial materials, culturally based materials, and hand crafts and materials for the development of a spiritual/religious life. The paper describes the control of error, aesthetics, activity, and limits as fundamental qualities of the prepared environment. The paper maintains that the role of the educator is similar in the Montessori preschool classroom and in Head Start and prekindergarten classrooms. Additionally, the paper describes the NAEYC's code of ethical conduct and standards for developmentally appropriate practice. It asserts that consolidating the resources from Head Start and state universal prekindergarten programs, the Montessori environment, and the ethical contract of the NAEYC and developmentally appropriate practice will essentially create a nationwide preschool policy. Nevertheless, it is noted that persuading the government, private concerns, educators, parents, and the public to embrace a cohesive idea could be formidable. (Contains 12 references.) (Author/KB)

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An Argument for Nationalizing Montessori Style Preschool Education in the United States.

Greg Michel

Abstract

Widespread Head Start and Universal Pre k programs validate the need for a nationalized preschool program. Dr. Maria Montessori carefully observed young children's behavior. She developed a model for classrooms called the prepared environment. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) outlines ethical conduct for early childhood educators. Developmentally appropriate practice is defined for early childhood programs. Fusing the NAEYC standards with the Montessori environment while consolidating resources from Head Start and UPK would in effect establish a national preschool program. Common experiences shared in early childhood help children grow socially. Implementation of a uniform system would help children become confident, tolerant and propitious citizens.

Introduction

What is the function of education? Jacques Ellul wrote that education "must seek to develop, in a balanced way all children's faculties, physical, manual, psychic, and intellectual, and it must seek to stress personal observation and reasoning instead of wrote learning." (Ellul, 1964 p. 345.) Basically education should provide children with the power to think instead of repeat.

As preschool programs expand, larger numbers of young children benefit and perform better in kindergarten. Montessori style classroom environments use developmentally appropriate practices, outlined by the NAEYC, to teach children how to play and learn cooperatively. By realigning resources already in place, establishing Montessori style environments and following the NAEYC's guidelines a national preschool program would exist.

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Pre School Education

Head Start

Head Start is a national program aimed at children who face educational, economic and environmental challenges. Low test scores, poverty and limited education of parents are criteria for inclusion into the program. The Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) undertaken by the Commissioner's Office of Research and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services tracks 3,200 Head Start children and their families from around the country. School readiness, family involvement, educational, health, nutritional services and classroom quality are measured. "Over 85 percent of households" (FACES, 2001, p. 2.) in Head Start families obtain income from other resources. Encouraging community involvement, supplying developmentally appropriate activities to help students prepare for kindergarten, fostering cultural awareness and safety are supports provided by the program.

The survey showed "significant improvement in social skills essential to successful functioning in school." (FACES, 2001, p. 3) By the end of kindergarten over 80 percent of Head Start graduates recognize every letter of the alphabet and show knowledge of book, print and phonemic awareness. More than 85 percent of parents were very satisfied overall. Head Start was rated as the best government program in 1999 according to the American Customer Satisfaction Index. Family members involved in Head Start programs went back to school, received licenses, certificates, degrees and found work. Parents reported the program as being instrumental in raising their children and helpful in giving them a "greater sense of control over

their own lives" (FACES, 2001, p. 3) Familial interest in education is a profound result of head start programs.

Classroom quality is directly related to teacher qualifications and class size. Class sizes were better, on the average, than the standards required by the NAEYC. Classrooms with a high degree of "simple interactive play or pretend play" (FACES, 2001, p. 4.) were found to be more successful than those without. Play is a significant indication of social development. Head Start provides students and families in need with the tools and experiences necessary for success in kindergarten. Children develop self esteem and are more prepared for scholastic achievement.

Universal Pre K

Universal Pre K (UPK) programs are widespread and include all children regardless of socioeconomic status. Play is a focus for the program . The UPK classroom provides the four year old with a safe place to take risks at role playing and creative expression. "Play also fosters socio-emotional growth." (UPK Play 2002 p. 1). A UPK environment encourages accomplishment by providing appropriate manipulatives. Play supports physical and sensory development. Young children use play to "solve problems of shape, size ,color, aesthetics, form and function." (UPK Play 2002 p. 1). The UPK instructor is trained highlighting the importance of observing, listening, recording and responding to children's behavior.

Head Start clearly helps families in need. The UPK program prepares all children for kindergarten and is spreading through out the country. Both programs highlight play as an

indispensable tool for developing social skills. Shared interactions during play times are key to social development. If all children could play with each other a greater sense of tolerance would evolve. The success of each program is proof that preschool education is beneficial regardless of who it is administered to.

The Montessori Environment

The Montessori environment provides a model where play meets work and learning. Maria Montessori believed that children have a natural propensity toward learning. The specifically designed environment "becomes a kind of instructor or sentinel, so prepared that it will attract" students. (Montissori, 1967, p. 103). Chairs, tables, bathrooms and storage space are appropriate sizes. The prepared environment consists of practical life and occupational materials, the sensorial materials, culturally based materials such as history, art, geography and hand crafts and materials for the development of a spiritual and religious life.

Practical life exercises are designed to teach life skills. Lessons are given in slow deliberate motion. Four areas cover the broad spectrum of activities. Grace, courtesy and good manners include bathroom, greeting and entrance protocols. Gross and fine motor skill activities which vary and are adjusted according to the needs of the individual and class. Caring for the self such as personal hygiene, washing, buttoning, tying shoes. Caring for the environment entails sweeping, cleaning, scrubbing and other process related activities. All of these exercises teach patients and social skills (Standing, 1957).

Sensorial materials for color, shape, size, weight, sound, quantity, hardness and all varieties of differentiations are displayed and introduced in orderly planned progression. The activities should be easy to understand and perform. Everything should be clean, well maintained and intact. Sensorial materials should be undecorated, attractive and reflect the local culture. Activities should be color coated and be self contained. All furniture must also be child friendly including switches and handles. Activities for the acquisition of culture include history, geography and art. Materials for developing a spiritual life could be considered by local administrations (Montessori, 1966).

The control of error, aesthetics, activity and limits are "fundamental qualities common to everything in the educational environment surrounding a child." (Montessori, 1967, p. 102). The control of error refers to making materials manageable. There should be a relatively obvious increment to follow. Mistakes can be made but are easily corrected when patterns are recognized. Aesthetics involves decorating and presenting objects in a pleasing attractive way. All materials should invite children to investigate. Activity is a primary motivation for developing classroom activities. The setting should be arranged so as to meet children's need to be actively engaged. Montessori states that "a thing should be interesting in itself but that it must lend itself to the motor activity of the child." (Montessori, 1967, p. 104). Finally every material in the classroom environment must be limited in quantity. "Order should pervade the Montessori classroom down to the smallest detail." (Standing, 1957, p. 270). The prepared

environment exists to bring orderliness to the child's world of sensory input. Over stimulation by using too many can confuse and frustrate children.

The Montessori environment provides children opportunities to manage the daily life of the classroom together and develop behaviors supporting collaboration and cooperation. In Head Start and UPK programs the teachers role is as a facilitator. Montessori calls the educator a directress. Both imply similar functions. The idea is not to completely change the developing systems but adhere to a uniform system appropriate for young children. Utilizing the Montessori model for classroom materials and design would allow preschool children to develop the skills necessary for success in kindergarten.

NAEYC and DAP

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is a professional organization dedicated to young children's best interest in the field of education. The NAEYC's Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment is grounded in core values. Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) provides standards about what materials should be included in a preschool classroom and how should they be used.

The NAEYC defines core values for educators. Realizing that childhood is a crucial stage of life, focusing instruction on current knowledge, encouraging familial relationships, understanding that family, culture, community and society are important in understanding children, respecting all participants in a child's development and helping people to reach their

potential are commitments early childhood educators are obligated to.

The NAEYC's Code of Ethical Conduct is divided into four areas. Ethical responsibilities toward children, families, colleagues and community and society. The early childhood educators "paramount responsibility is to provide safe, healthy, nurturing, and responsive setting for children." (NAEYC, 1998, sec. 1) Childhood practitioners "shall not participate in practices that are disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitive, intimidating, emotionally damaging, or physically harmful to children." (NAEYC, 1998, P-1.1) Head Start, Universal Pre K, and Montessori educators are similar in dedication.

The NAEYC's definition of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) refers to three types of knowledge used by pedagogues in making decisions about the education of children. First utilizing information about the "age related human characteristics that permits general predictions within an age range about what activities, materials, interactions, or experiences will be safe, healthy, interesting, achievable, and also challenging to children" (Bredekamp, Copple, 1997, p. 9) is important. Then understanding individual and group needs and being able to respond to "inevitable individual variation" (Bredekamp, Copple, 1997, p. 9) is necessary. Finally "knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which children live" (Bredekamp, Copple, 1997, p. 9) assure learning is "meaningful, relevant, and respectful for the participating children and their families." (Bredekamp, Copple, 1997, p. 9)

The goal of early childhood education as a whole is for children to receive appropriate

education. The NAEYC's Code of Ethical Conduct and definition of Developmentally Appropriate Practice supports the goals of Head Start and UPK programs. The Montessori environment meets the needs of early childhood learners and the NAEYC as well. A national preschool system is within reach. A consolidation of resources from Head Start and Universal Pre K programs, a Montessori environment, the ethical contract of the NAEYC and developmentally appropriate practice will essentially create a nationwide preschool policy.

Universal Environment

There are common threads that run through our culture. Voting, religious tolerance, the economy, creativity, health care, international affairs, computer technology, the mass media, violence and the importance of the family are subjects very few in this technological society can avoid. Young children who share common experiences within the context of the Montessori environment develop a sense of synergy. Activities on how to cooperate, share and have empathy are issues which need to be applied during early childhood. "It is the spirit of the child that can determine the course of human progress and lead it perhaps even to a higher form of civilization." (Montessori, 1966, p. 7).

Implementation

Uniting resources from Head Start and Universal Pre K programs would, in effect, create a national pre kindergarten program. Blank (1999) noted that pre kindergarten initiatives totaled over $1.6 billion for 3/4 million children served. State funded programs are growing.

Expansion, however takes tremendous resources. Persuading the government, private concerns, educators, parents and the public to embrace a cohesive idea could be a formidable task.

The NAEYC defines financing to mean "all elements supporting the provision of high-quality early childhood education for all children." (Robinson 2002). Federal, state, local and private funding would be needed to train teachers, purchase educational materials and create classrooms. Consolidating resources which are already in place and utilizing the Montissori classroom would establish a standard pre school environment.

Conclusion

Head Start, Universal Pre K, the NAEYC and the educational community validate the need for preschool education. Head Start programs, UPK, the Montessori environment and the NAEYC have identical intentions. To provide every child with an opportunity to succeed scholastically in a safe, supportive, and nurturing environment. Similar experiences in Montessori environments would give children the power to work together and build their world. Allowing children to play and work with each other in a Montessori environment teaches tolerance, patients and self esteem. "The education of even a very small child, therefore, does not aim at preparing him for school but for life." (Montessori 1967). By providing young children developmentally appropriate environments and knowledgeable pedagogues we can let them play and they will learn.

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